



Veterinary homeopathy: An overview

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Introduction

In recent years, people in North America have increasingly been seeking nonconventional therapies for themselves and their pets. Although alternative therapies have been recognized and accepted for much longer in European countries and other parts of the world than in North America, the growing interest in North America has finally caught the attention of both the medical and veterinary communities (1,2). Results of the 1997 pet owner survey by the American Animal Hospital Association indicated that 21% of pet owners sought some form of alternative care for their pet, while results of a 1997 survey on the Internet showed that 23% of responding pet owners would use alternative care as the primary therapy for their pets (1).

History

Homeopathy has existed in various forms since ancient times. References to the use of homeopathic principles exist in records from ancient Egyptians, Chinese, Incas, Aztecs, and Native Americans (3). The basic concept of homeopathy, the "principle of similars," was described and used by Hippocrates (4). A variety of practices based on homeopathic principles have been described over centuries, but homeopathy was not organized and practised in a systematic way until the late 1800s, when Dr. Samuel Hahnemann, a German physician, developed the science of homeopathy. Disgruntled with the conventional medical practices of the time, he turned to translating new and old medical texts to support himself. In the course of translating these works, he was exposed to some of the principles of homeopathy. He began to experiment by using smaller and smaller doses of various herbs, first on himself, and then on a growing number of friends and colleagues who volunteered to help as they began to see beneficial effects from some of these "homeopathic" medicines. Hahnemann carefully recorded all of his work, and continued to read and develop theories about homeopathic treatment, which he would research and test throughout his life. As word of his accomplishments spread, students and physicians from all over Europe went to study and work with him.

Because homeopathy is based on such opposing principles, homeopaths faced a great deal of adverse criticism from practitioners of allopathic or conventional therapies;

despite this, homeopathy became well known throughout Europe and America, and, by the early 1900s, was well established in India. During the 1900s, however, the practice of homeopathy gradually died out in North America, partly due to burgeoning interest in technologic advances, partly due to continuing opposition by allopathic practitioners and associations, and partly due to eclectic approaches that diverged from Dr. Hahnemann's classical approach and were not as effective in accomplishing cures. By the 1960s, only a few homeopaths remained in North America. In Europe, however, homeopathy remained an established treatment modality. The Royal London Homeopathic Hospital has continued to operate and, in India, homeopathy has thrived, partially due to the lower cost of homeopathic medicines and homeopathy's nonreliance on expensive technologies. Homeopathy has been used in veterinary medicine in Britain since the early 1900s; in North America, it has seen an increase in usage only in the last 20 years. A professional course in veterinary homeopathy has been offered annually in the United States for the past 7 years; this year, a similar course will be offered in Canada.

What is homeopathy?

Homeopathy is a system of medicine based on the principle of similars; that is, the symptoms or syndromes that a substance causes experimentally (at pharmacologic or toxic doses) are those that it may resolve in individuals experiencing similar symptoms and syndromes when it is given in specially prepared, exceedingly small doses. The word "homeopathy" is derived from the Greek words "homios" meaning "similar," and "pathos" meaning "disease or suffering." In practising homeopathy, the symptoms that an animal exhibits are all-important in choosing the appropriate remedy to stimulate a healing response. Whereas, in conventional medicine, the thinking may assume that symptoms or signs represent the disease itself and need to be controlled or eliminated, in homeopathy, a symptom or sign is seen, not as the disease itself, but as a signal of it. Removing or suppressing a symptom or sign does not necessarily affect or remove the cause of the symptom or sign, in the same way that unplugging a car's low oil warning light does not resolve the actual problem with the car. Therefore, homeopathy can be looked on as a method of individualizing a medicine for a patient; it is a system of finding a medicine that fits the totality of physical and psychological signs seen in a patient, in order to effect a cure in a deep and lasting way.

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Mechanisms and theory

In choosing a homeopathic remedy, all of an animal's clinical signs, even those that are seemingly unrelated to the primary problem, are taken into consideration, on the principle that all of the symptoms are "signs" of the body's reaction to external stimuli or internal imbalances. These symptoms are gathered together and analyzed; then the remedy most appropriate to the case is chosen by comparison with descriptions of remedies that have been catalogued over the years. The chosen remedy is then administered *per os* in the appropriate strength or "potency." Often, only a single dose of a remedy is necessary, for if it is the "similimum," that is, the remedy that exactly matches the signs and the disease process affecting the animal, it can give the animal's life force the "push" it needs to heal itself.

The greatest obstacle to homeopathy is in understanding the concept of the principle of similars. It seems unlikely that giving a dose of a substance that creates signs similar to those an animal is showing could actually heal it. However, because signs may be adaptive responses of an animal against infection or stress, by using minute doses of a substance known to cause similar signs one may in fact augment the defensive response. Conventional medicine applies this principle to some extent in the application of immunization and allergy hyposensitization. Homeopathic remedies are prepared from a variety of different substances, including herbs, minerals, and animal products, such as bee venom or cuttlefish ink. The substances are diluted repeatedly and agitated numerous times, so that only a miniscule amount, if any, of the original substance is actually present in the final product. This process is called "potentization," and homeopaths have observed that the more a substance is potentized, the more deeply the medicine acts and the fewer the doses that are necessary for treatment. This concept also seems contrary to logic, but recent research in the field of biochemistry has shown that very diluted substances can have powerful effects on the physical body (3). Also, recent advances in physics have opened the way for scientific explanations of the actions of homeopathic remedies in physical systems (3). There has been more laboratory and clinical research into homeopathic medicine than most scientists realize (see (3) for overview). Although much more research and clinical work are needed, studies already done provide a good scientific basis to which practitioners can refer for an insight into homeopathy.

Applications in practice

Homeopathy can be used to treat a surprising number of conditions in both large and small animals. It can be used as therapy in trauma and acute injuries; for example, in sprains, concussions, and insect stings. In such cases, the appropriate homeopathic remedy can minimize or eliminate swelling and pain, and shorten recovery time. It can be used in many types of inflammatory conditions, such as acute and chronic diarrhea, chronic gingivitis, acute and chronic respiratory conditions, and other conditions that may or may not be responsive to conventional therapies. Homeopathy can be used to treat all types of acute and chronic skin conditions, including

infections and allergies, and if used appropriately, may even be effective in the treatment of immune-mediated disorders.

Although homeopathy may be most effective in the treatment of conditions in which serious pathology has not yet occurred in the patient's system, it can also be very helpful in the treatment of many chronic conditions, such as arthritis and spondylosis. Homeopathy can also be helpful in palliating discomfort associated with cancer.

In large animals, indications are much the same. Homeopathy can deal with many of the acute and chronic medical conditions seen in cattle and horses. It may be a useful therapy in some common conditions, such as downer syndrome in cows, mastitis, and colic in horses. Remedies generally come in the form of tiny tablets or liquid and are designed to be absorbed through the tongue or gums and not put down the throat; since neither tablets nor liquid has much taste, administration is usually quite easy. Homeopathic remedies are very safe to use. Generally, no side effects are observed, if the remedy is used correctly. However, in the hands of persons with little or no knowledge of homeopathy, remedies may be overused or, much more commonly, the wrong remedy is used, and no effect at all will be seen. This obviously does not harm the patient, but it does it no good either and is one of the reasons why, in the recent past, homeopathy was seen as a treatment with little or no effectiveness.

In potentially life-threatening conditions, such as epilepsy or bloat, the appropriate therapy can be as effective as conventional medication, but since it is imperative that the correct remedy be chosen and response times be understood, conditions such as these should only be treated under the direct observation of a qualified and experienced homeopath.

Summary

Complementary and alternative therapies, including homeopathy, have a definite place in veterinary medicine today. The public is demanding access to a full range of conventional and complementary therapies, and the best scenario is to have all therapies available, for there is a place and a need for all of them in the right situation. In my own practice, I use both alternative and conventional therapies, as well as referring patients to specialists for services such as ultrasound and surgery. I believe that the wave of the future is to have veterinarians skilled in both complementary and conventional therapies, and to have veterinary practitioners who are well enough educated to be able to treat the majority of their patients, but who are willing to refer to the appropriate "specialist," if the case and the client demand it.

Veterinarians are definitely becoming more aware of the need for and showing more interest in alternative medicine. There are currently several associations in North America for veterinarians with an interest in complementary therapies. In 1998, the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS) boasted 1400 members, and the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA) over 800 (1). There are professional courses in veterinary acupuncture, chiropractic, and homeopathy, all 150–200 hours in length, which

provide a good basic understanding of these modalities. In most of these modalities, there is also advanced training.

Conventional teaching institutions are recognizing the need to have veterinarians well versed in all aspects of veterinary medicine. Colorado State University has offered elective courses for students and on-site courses for practitioners on alternative therapies for 3 years (1). These are designed to teach veterinarians what the alternative modalities are, whether they are effective, and what it takes to become qualified to practise them.

The overriding goal in most veterinarians' minds is to heal animals and provide the best in care, so that animals can live healthy productive lives. Education to keep up with new therapies and medications is paramount to this goal. It follows easily that knowledge of noninvasive treatments with few or no side effects that have the potential to heal animals should be welcomed, and homeopathy, as well as other complementary therapies, fits this description.

References

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2. Evans L. Another side of science. Trends Magazine 1998; February/March: 30-33.
3. Ullman D. Homeopathic medicine: Principles and research. In Schoen AM, Wynn SG eds: Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine: Principles and Practice. St. Louis: Mosby, 1998: 469-484.
4. Dooley T. Homeopathy, Beyond Flat Earth Medicine. San Diego: Timing Publ, 1995: 34.

Suggestions for further reading

1. Schoen AM, Wynn SG, eds. Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine: Principles and Practice. St. Louis: Mosby, 1998.
2. Dooley T. Homeopathy, Beyond Flat Earth Medicine. San Diego: Timing Publ, 1995.

3. Vilhoukas G. The Science of Homeopathy. New York: Grove Pr, 1980.
4. Coulter HL. Homeopathic Medicine and Modern Science. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1980.

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BOOK REVIEW



COMPTE RENDU DE LIVRE

Watson T, ed. *Metabolic and Endocrine Problems of the Horse*. WB Saunders, Toronto, Ontario, 1998. 227 pp. 0-7020-2241-1. \$117.00 CDN.

This recent publication covers laminitis, hyperlipemia, pituitary gland disorders, adrenal gland disorders, thyroid gland disorders, rhabdomyolysis, hyperkalemic periodic paralysis, hepatobiliary disease, renal disease, endotoxemia, fluid and electrolyte abnormalities, and assessment of nutritional status in horses. The subjects are covered thoroughly, with current understanding of pathophysiological mechanisms, treatment recommendations, and therapeutic approaches. The references are extensive and current. The contributing authors are excellent and internationally recognized for their exper-

tise. Subsequent editions would be more complete with discussions of hypocalcemia, hyperparathyroidism, and anhidrosis.

This is a good quality publication, hardbound and 227 pages. The price and selective scope of the book will not make it essential or practical for all practitioners and students of veterinary medicine to own. It is an excellent resource of reference material. It is particularly useful for teachers, specialists in equine internal medicine, and anyone with an interest in equine medicine in general.

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